

Zeitschrift:	Die Schweiz = Suisse = Svizzera = Switzerland : officielle Reisezeitschrift der Schweiz. Verkehrszentrale, der Schweizerischen Bundesbahnen, Privatbahnen ... [et al.]
Herausgeber:	Schweizerische Verkehrszentrale
Band:	42 (1969)
Heft:	1
Artikel:	Letter from Switzerland
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DOI:	https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-778193

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LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

EUGENE V. EPSTEIN

Since curling is a rather old game—having originated somewhere or other in the fifteenth century—there are naturally a lot of old jokes about the sport. Old jokes are all right in their place, but they simply do not blend well with curling, which is a fine and difficult pursuit. To take the wind out of everyone's sails right at the start, I must state that curling simply isn't the old man's game it is thought by many to be.

"Then it's an old lady's game," said my friend Hermann, who had just been named president of the Swiss Anti-Curler's Klub (SACK).

I assured Hermann that I was closer to my own adolescence than to senility, and I liked the game very much.

"You like the game," Hermann replied, "because you don't have to wear skis on your feet to participate, and, furthermore, it's a heck of a lot easier than skiing."

"I don't travel into the mountains every winter to wear myself out," I told him. "I like the free and easy camaraderie of the curling clan. They are true sportsmen. Curling requires intense concentration; there is no ranting and raving and rushing about up and down the mountains. This is the difference, *old man*, although I'm still not sure you understand me."

"Well, to tell you the truth, I don't... and I never want to!" Hermann said.

"Let me explain it to you. Imagine standing on the smoothest, most perfect piece of ice in the world—a shiny battlefield in the crisp, health-giving air of the Alps."

"Go on, old fellow," Hermann interjected.

"Well," I continued, "there you are, wanting to learn something about the distinguished sport of curling, just as I was last year at this time. And look at me today: a master curler already! Anyway, the first thing you notice is that somebody offers you some stones with handles on them. These are what our irreverent friends call hot-water bottles. But they're fine stones, heavy, polished granite from the Scottish quarries at Mauchline in Ayrshire or Ailsa Craig in the Firth of Clyde."

"Firth things firth, please," said Hermann. "Or should I simply take you for granite?"

"Hermann," I countered, "I just finished talking about old jokes. For your information—once and for all—I know *every* curling joke you can think of. So be quiet, and learn something for a change!" I then continued my lesson:

"Curling is played on a rink by a rink. That is to say, there is a rink which is a number of yards long and then there are the teams, which are also called rinks. There are circles—called 'houses'—at both ends of the rinks, the ice rinks, I mean, not the people rinks. The circles contain a number of additional concentric circles to help scoring, although the individual circles have absolutely nothing to do with the number of points one gets. The center of the house is called the tee, and on the tee there stands a 'dolly,' which is like a bowling pin. The dolly is extremely important, but it can be removed anytime by the skip, who is the captain."

"If dolly is so important," asked Hermann, "why can she be removed by the captain, or would you rather skip that question?"

"Dolly is a thing, not a she, and stop your infernal punning! It must be terrible living with you. How in heaven's name can your wife stand all those horrible plays on words? Now, let's get on with our curling—I think you'll learn to like it after a time."

"The dolly, as I said, is extremely important, although, quite frankly, she—I mean, it—has virtually nothing to do with the

game, other than serving as—well—a focal point of everything that's happening on the ice—I mean, the rink. Now, to continue, each team, consisting of four players each, shoots eight stones into the opposing house, and are directed to do so by their own skip who tells them to curl in or curl out. Curling is the name of the game and it comes from the fact that the stones are not bowled down the ice, but are 'curled' down, with an 'in' curl or an 'out' curl. The stones are then able to describe various curves so that they avoid other stones and so on.

"Now, one of the most important things to know about this marvelous game is that you can't play it without a broom in one hand."

"Now that's a sweeping statement," said Hermann. "Continue, I'm bristling with excitement!"

"The purpose of the broom is to sweep the ice in front of the stones, but only when the skip says so. For example, if your skip wants a particular curve on the stone, he allows it to reach a certain point on the ice and then calls for the other two members of your team to sweep in front of it. This melts the ice a bit and prevents the curling stone from continuing its curve. The stone changes direction and ostensibly ends up where the skip wanted it to in the first place. I forgot to mention from the very beginning that the skip stands at the other end of the ice and gives directions—using his broom to point to the spot where he wants the various stones. There are a lot of other details, of course, but basically the idea is for one team go get as many of their stones as close to the middle as possible without having an opposing stone between them. I mean, one stone near the tee or dolly counts one point, the next stone another point, but only one team can make points. Is that clear?"

"No, but with you nothing ever is."

"Now, when all sixteen stones—each, incidentally, weighing around 44 pounds—have been shot, the that is called the end."

"Thank goodness!" cried Hermann.

"No, not the end of the game. Just the *first* end. Each game consists of nine or eleven or thirteen ends, depending on how the players feel. Then the whole thing starts all over again, but in the opposite direction. Fun, don't you think?"

"No, not especially. And, anyway, I don't like sweeping—I get enough of it at home. But I sure like to sweep late in morning, that I can tell you!"

"The most important thing about the game is that the skip is always right. If he places his broom on a particular spot and says 'Play it,' you play it. He's the boss. In other words, he stands at the top of the rink and points with his broom."

"Oh, sort of like 'broom at the top'!"

"Yes, exactly. That broom you treat so lightly, sir, is the sceptre of the curler. No honorable curler would ever be seen without it. Now, for your information, here are some other details: learn where the 'hog' is, watch out for the 'sweeping score' and always remember the difference between the normal side and keen side of your stone. Sweep when the skip tells you and stop when he says 'up' and make sure you play the stones with the right colour bubbles. If you give an 'in handle' when you're told to and an 'out' when it's asked for, you'll have absolute no trouble with the bubble. Keep your foot on the crampit or in the hack and, whatever you do, play the broom. Now, do you think you understand a bit more?"

"I suppose so, except for one thing."

"What's that, Hermann?"

"Are you crazy?"